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ABSTRACT

The pamphlet is intended to show that communication works better than punishment in correcting children. Examples are cited of non-punishment reactions and messages in which parents tell their children how they feel about their actions, what parents don't like about it, and why. The importance of active listening is stressed and examples of its use in helping children feel understood are offered. Ways in which active listening works with verbal as well as preverbal children are noted. (CL)

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The National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (NCPCA) publishes materials that deal with a variety of topics, including parenting, child abuse, and child abuse prevention. This pamphlet and other materials can also be personalized. Write or call for a free catalog from **NCPCA, Publishing Department, 332 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 950, Chicago, IL 60604-4357, (312) 663-3520.**

"I hear you."

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Most parents believe you have to use *PUNISHMENT* when you are raising children. But that's not true. This pamphlet will show you that *COMMUNICATING* works better.

But first, what do we mean by punishment? When you punish your child, you are trying to change his behavior by doing something to him that makes him feel bad or hurts him. The punishment may be mild:

Sending him to his room
Taking her bike away
Slapping him on the hand

Or the punishment may be harsh and painful:

A slap on the face
A hard spanking or beating

What is it that you really want to happen when you punish your child? You probably want to make your child stop doing something that *you don't like*.

Can you remember back to when *you* were little? How did you feel when you got punished? When your mom or dad took something away from you, you probably felt bad, and if they spanked you hard or beat you, it made you hurt. Chances are you didn't feel very good about yourself afterward.

Most parents don't really want to make their children feel bad or actually hurt them. They punish because they think they need to.

Lots of parents who were punished when *they* were growing up think that children have to be punished so that they will be happy, responsible, well-behaved persons when they grow up. And many parents just don't know any other way to make their child stop doing things they don't like.

But there are other ways that work better. Let's look at how little Jimmy's dad learned a way to get his message across without spanking:

One day Jimmy's dad was all dressed up and sitting in his chair waiting to go out. Little Jimmy ran into the room and was about to climb onto his dad's lap. But just in time, his dad noticed that Jimmy had peanut butter and jelly all over his hands. Dad realized that Jimmy was too little to understand about what gooey hands do to clean clothes. Quickly, Dad kept Jimmy from climbing up. Then he gently led Jimmy into the

bathroom and helped wash the peanut butter and jelly off his hands. After that he took him by the hand, led him back to the chair, and lifted him up into his lap. Without hitting or slapping or yelling, Dad showed Jimmy by his *actions* what he wanted.

If Jimmy had been older, Dad could have used words instead of actions: "Jimmy, I'm afraid that if you get on my lap I'll get peanut butter and jelly on my pants and shirt, and then I'll have to change clothes. When your hands are clean I'd really like you to sit in my lap."

In both cases Jimmy's dad is using *NON-PUNISHMENT* as a way to keep sticky hands off of his suit. He is *COMMUNICATING* to Jimmy, with actions or words, what he wants or what he doesn't want, what he likes or doesn't like.

I want to keep my suit clean.
I want to look nice for the party.
I don't want to change my clothes.
I would like you on my lap but not with your hands dirty.

Dad has gotten his message across to Jimmy without making him feel bad or causing him pain.

Here are examples of *NON-PUNISHMENT* messages:

- I hate to make dinner when there's food and dishes left all over the kitchen.
- I can't rest when there is so much noise in the house.
- I'm late for work when you are not ready in the morning.
- When you don't come home at the time you promised, I really worry a lot and can't get to sleep. Then I'm tired in the morning.

Notice the "I" in all these messages. You are telling your child clearly and honestly how you feel about what he is doing, what you don't like about it, and why. You are asking for his help and cooperation. Most people respond to a friendly call for help—and children are no different!

Now, what about the irritating things kids do when *they* are having problems in their lives? Children often don't know how to tell you when they feel something is wrong in their world. So instead they "act it out." What you see is the child:

- whining
- crying
- hitting other children
- not sleeping
- not eating
- withdrawing
- spitting out food
- spilling food
- fighting over a toy
- holding bowel movements
- being hyperactive
- pouting

Such actions are often the child's way of saying that he or she is hungry, tired, in pain, overexcited, afraid, cold, or thirsty. Your child is sending you a message about a problem and needs your help to solve it. He or she wants you to "hear" the real message: "Help me get what I need!" Many times parents don't hear the message *behind* the yucky behavior. So they end up:

- snarling
- jerking
- pinching
- shouting
- shaking
- hitting
- slapping
- spanking

or doing some other kind of *punishment*. Now *two* people

are acting yucky and hurting and not feeling good about themselves. Have you ever noticed that when children are punished for crying, they often cry harder? And when they're punished for not going to sleep, they stay awake longer? And when they're punished for not eating, they don't eat at all?

And when they're punished for acting rotten they act even more rotten? At that point some parents punish *harder*, the children act *worse*, and so on, until sometimes children are seriously injured.

"Billy, stop that. You're acting like a brat!"
"I don't care."
A MINUTE OR TWO PASSES
"Now stop it or you're going to get it!"
"So what?"
"Why you little!?! ☆ Grrr!!
That's it! WHAM !!
Now you go straight to your room! I MEAN NOW!!
Billy? Billy get up. Billy, what's the matter?!..."

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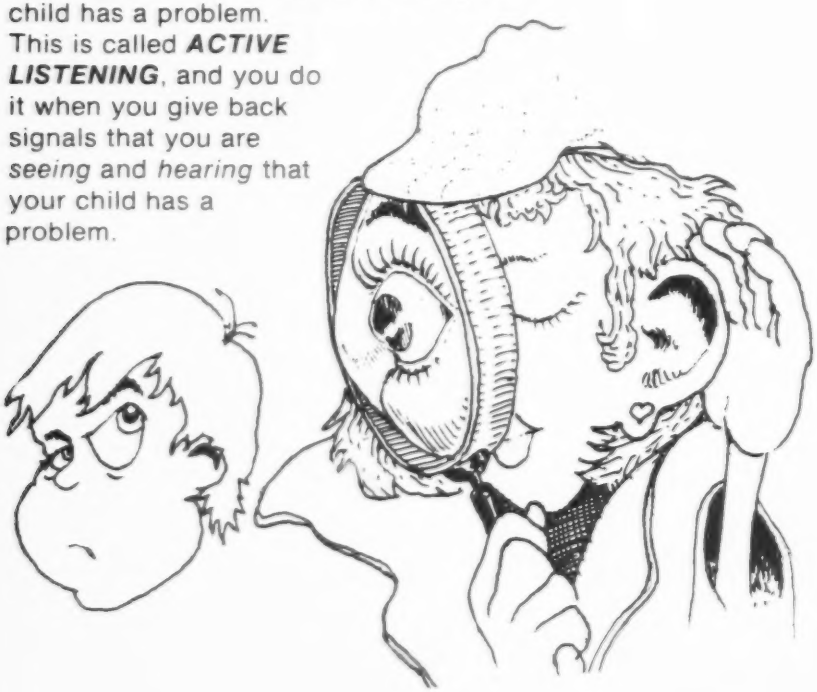
If punishment just makes things worse, what can you do instead? Once again, you guessed it—*COMMUNICATION*. Only this time you need to listen rather than talk! Remember, for two people to have *good communication*, one person has to send a message, and the other person has to *hear* the message and then send back a signal that the message has been heard! So now you need to be a good detective *and* listen for clues. You want to communicate that you hear and understand that your child has a problem. This is called ***ACTIVE LISTENING***, and you do it when you give back signals that you are *seeing* and *hearing* that your child has a problem.



Here are some things you might say:

"You're not very happy right now."
"You really look cold (or hungry, or tired, or wet)."
"You must feel pretty discouraged (or angry, or sorry, or unhappy)."
"You really do have a problem."
"Would you like to talk about it?"
"Tell me all about it."

Notice that these messages have a lot of "yous." That is because you are thinking about what your *child* might be trying to say, instead of what *you* want to say.

Why use these listening messages? Well, haven't *you* ever felt relieved just to get your feelings "off your chest?"

Do you remember feeling *MUCH BETTER* after someone helped you talk about your unhappy feelings? Remember how warm it felt to be understood? Well, children are no different!

Here's how Janie's mom sent a listening message to Janie:

It was storming outside one day and Janie got very upset hearing the sound of thunder. She came crying to her mom, saying, "I'm afraid—I don't like the thunder!" Her mom said, "It's just the clouds bumping into each other."

But Janie kept crying, saying, "I don't want to hear it, I'm afraid!" Her mom said, "It won't hurt you, Janie, it's just a noise." Janie cried even harder. Then Janie's mom remembered **Active Listening**. She said, "You're worried about the thunder, aren't you? You wish it would stop 'cause it scares you." With that, Janie's worried expression left her face, and she stopped crying and trotted off to play. *Janie just wanted her mom to understand how she felt*!

Now let's look at how 8-year-old Jerry's mom helped him by using **Active Listening**. Jerry came in from playing one evening with a very serious expression on his face:

Jerry: Mom, what would happen if someone was playing in someone's yard and he broke a clothesline?

Mom: Sounds like you're worried, Jerry.

J: Yeah. I didn't know the people, I just ran away.

M: You're worried because you ran away?

J: No, I'm scared! What can they do to me?

M: You're afraid of what they might do to you for breaking their clothesline.

J: Not just me. Alan was there too. We were playing on the clothesline next door to Teddy's house and it broke. So we just ran away, and now I'm afraid they'll find out it's broken.

M: Wow, sounds like you're really upset!

J: Yeah. What should I do?

M: You'd really like it if I told you what to do?

J: Oh, I know you won't. It's my problem...but, Mom, if you were me what would you do?

M: Well, Jerry, if I were you, I'd think about some of the choices I could make: I could forget it ever happened.

Since you don't know the people they might never find out who did it. *OR*, I could ask Dad to help me fix it. *OR*, I could go and tell them I broke their clothesline and would be glad to try and fix it. *OR*, I could ask Alan to help me fix it. There are lots of things I *could* do, Jerry. But I'm not sure at this point what I would do.

Jerry looked very thoughtful. He went into the living room and began watching television. His mom wondered if he was going to do anything about the problem. *But she didn't say* anything to Jerry. It was hard for Jerry's mom not to tell Jerry what to do. But she knew Jerry needed to solve his own problem so that he would learn to have confidence in himself.

A lot of time passed, and then Jerry got up and went outside. About fifteen minutes later Jerry came running back in. He was very excited. He said, "Oh, Mom, I decided to go over and tell those people that I broke their clothesline and that I was sorry it happened and that I could try and fix it. Well, Mom, the man was so nice. He said, 'Oh, that thing always breaks, don't worry about it. But thanks for telling me.' Isn't he nice, Mom?"

When Jerry's father came home, Jerry felt so good about himself he told the whole story all over again to his dad. It was a very exciting thing for Jerry to share. He felt good about himself because he was able to make a decision on his own. His mom and dad felt good about him, too.

When you do **Active Listening** with older children like Jerry, it really helps them find their own solutions to their problems. It works because this kind of listening shows that you understand your child's message. When you listen this way, you are really saying to your child:

I hear your problem.
I can understand your feelings.
I'll help you think it through, but I won't solve your problem for you.
I have faith that you can find a good solution of your own.

When your child gets this kind of message from you, it helps him or her become:

- More self-confident
- More responsible
- More independent
- A better problem solver

And isn't that what every parent wants?

Now, how does **Active Listening** work when your child is too young to talk? With babies and very young children, you have to help them with their problems by your *actions*. You will have to do something, take some *action*. Here are some kinds of things you could do if your baby or toddler has a problem:

Hold her in your arms	Sing him a song
Rock him	Burp her
Touch him or stroke him	Change his diaper
Offer her another toy or another kind of food	Give her a drink
	Cover him with a blanket

When you do these things, it is also a good idea to use **Active Listening**. Even though he or she can't understand the words yet, your *feelings* of understanding will come through:

"Aha, you're really not sleepy tonight."
"You must have had a bad dream or maybe you got cold."
"I'll bet you're thirsty."
"You'd like to have a toy to play with, too."
"I'll bet you're cold with that old wet diaper."
"That must have really hurt when you fell down."

One of the rewards of using **Active Listening** with your baby is that he or she will probably learn to talk earlier. And *you* will be practicing **Active Listening** and getting into the habit of using it. So when your child is older, you'll really be good at it.

REMEMBER

- You don't have to make your child feel bad or cause him or her pain.
- There are happier ways to change behaviors you don't like.
- When your child has a problem of his own, he often does things that are irritating or annoying.
- Your best chance of getting your child to *STOP* the annoying behavior is to *HELP* her get her problem solved.
- Work together on the *problem*, not the *behavior*.

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